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October 30, 2007: Hallowed Secularism and Materialism

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10/30/2007--Hallowed Secularism confronts three great traditions of meaning in our culture: religion, humanism and materialism. I have addressed religion and humanism in this blog. The next posts will deal with materialism.

On October 21, 2007, the John Templeton Foundation took out a two-page advertisement in the Sunday New York Times--a quite expensive undertaking--to introduce its "big questions" project. The question at the top of the ad was "Does the Universe Have a Purpose?" The question was put, in the words of the ad, to "leading scientists and scholars". The lineup of responders was, nine scientists, two theologians and one humanist—all eminent persons. The big questions idea is exactly the sort of thing the Foundation does. The Templeton Foundation's mission statement begins: "The mission of the John Templeton Foundation is to serve as a philanthropic catalyst for discovery in areas engaging life's biggest questions."

There are several point to note about this ad. First, the question itself: does the universe have a purpose? The question is posed from the perspective of materialism. It is a question about the physical universe. From a religious perspective the question more likely would have been, what was God's purpose in creating the universe? From the perspective of humanism, the question would have been, does man have a purpose? Apparently, the questions of religion and humanism are not as compelling as they once were. We now address our questions to nature.

Granted, the answer that someone gives to the Templeton question might involve God or man. But the question is material in its orientation.

The second point about the ad is the sort of person who would be thought able to contribute in answering the question. In the ad, the question of meaning was directed primarily, though not exclusively, to scientists.

The Templeton Foundation might have wondered how a scientist could answer a question about meaning. Scientists do not study meaning. It is not meaning that scientists are expert in. So, the fact that the Templeton Foundation assumes that scientists would have the most to contribute to this question tells us a lot. The Foundation also assumed that most people would agree that scientists have a lot to say about meaning and would want to hear from them. This says a great deal about the power of materialism. We are being told in this ad, and expected to agree, that materialism is the fundamental truth about the universe and that scientists who are expert in that materialism are the ones who can say whether materialism excludes, or does not exclude, something called meaning.

Finally, there is the kind of answer that everyone in the ad gave. The content of the answers were split, with only two “no’s” and one “unlikely” out of the twelve. But no one except Elie Wiesel answered from the standpoint of the authority of scripture. No one except Nancey Murphy, professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, answered based on the authority of tradition. The scientific account of the world was the starting point for every other commentator. For example, John F. Haught, Senior Fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center of Georgetown University, who has less professional obligation to the scientific tradition than does the average working scientist, began his statement as follows: “If we accept evolution, as indeed we must... .” Professor Haught knows that no one who wants to be taken seriously by the educated culture can afford to cast any doubt on evolutionary theory, especially not someone involved with religious issues. If you did that, if you suggested that evolutionary was in any way questionable, you would be regarded as a religious nut. This is reflective of the power of materialism in our culture.